THE FINALITY OF LOVE
John 14:15-24
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On the way out the door we often speak the so-called last word. Such closing words have a tendency to be the truth. US Representative Marc Lincoln Marks of Pennsylvania issued some recently as he was retiring from office. On his way off stage, he offered a dramatic retraction of the votes he cast out of political savvy and self-interest, not conviction. He spoke heatedly about loss of funds for the poor while increasing defense spending. He accused other leaders of being blind to the suffering of those not insulated by corporate armor in economic hard times. He ended with the telling note, "These words are what I truly believe." At the end he spoke the truth. (Citizen-Journal, March 27, 1982)

The long discourse in the Gospel of John recounts Jesus' final words...important words he wanted to leave his followers. One commentator on the gospel reflected that Chapter 14 is much like a love letter...filled with the assurance of love, the promise of always being present and finally making clear the commitment between the lovers...between Jesus and his followers...that the commitment involves keeping the commandment to love one another. There have been approximately sixty-five generations since the followers of Jesus heard and recorded some of these final words: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." All these generations have had to face various challenges...of hunger, war, pestilence, disease, tragedy. All confessing groups of Christians from time to time have been faced with the meaning of keeping this final commandment...to love one another in the circumstances in which they loved their lives.

Our own Session faced such an issue when its members agreed to study the Presbyterian call to halt the arms race and to vote its position on the Statement. It is perhaps helpful to mention what this proposal is not. It is not a pacifist document, it does not propose disarmament, nor a unilateral freeze by the United States. What it does propose is a freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons by the United States and the Soviet Union. After four months of study and debate and discussion, our Session voted to endorse the nuclear arms freeze proposal. Hopefully, this is just the beginning of more study, debate and discussion on the subject by this congregation.

Such public expressions as the Presbyterian Call to Halt the Arms Race brings to the surface the very real danger posed by nuclear weapons and the need for all leaders to remember the potential for total destruction. President Reagan has responded to the rising expression of such public opinion. In his May 9 commencement address at Eureka College, he said, "I wish more than anything there were a simple policy that would eliminate the nuclear danger. But there are only difficult policy choices through which we can achieve a stable nuclear balance at the lowest possible level." (May 10, N.Y. Times) The lowest possible level is what the Presbyterian proposal is all about.

The subject is disagreeable. No generation until ours has had to contemplate the possibility that our species can destroy itself and most other forms of life. We do not like to think of this. In fact, we play games with ideas like limited nuclear war. The battles waging in the Falkland Islands demonstrate the fantasy. Lance Morrow in a recent Time essay (Time, May 17, 1982, p. 88) wrote, "Watching the war in the Falkland Islands, it seems remote and ominous and obscurely disgüsting. If we keep telling ourselves that we cannot do that sort of thing anymore...we are kidding ourselves."

Who isn't a little stunned that Great Britain and Argentina are at war? If we are honest, we know that war and the possibilities for war will not go away. Realistically asknowledging this potential our generation is faced with a necessary decision regarding the massive world-wide build up of nuclear weapons. The essay continued pointedly: "It is the sheer technology today that tears loose the wiring of our consciences...the knowledge that in another year, or two, or three, almost any country with a backyard plutonium kit will be dealing in apocalypse." (Time, May 17) The horrors of modern weapons in the Falkland Islands shake our complacency. We cannot even envision the affects if nuclear weapons were being used.

Difficult decisions were not easier for earlier generations. Take the year 1860. The issue of slavery has taken over every conversation. The possible restructuring of society threatens to break apart everything to which you are committed...your family, the new life you have worked for, and your country. You are torn by opposing sympathies, convictions and interests. Should you join the abolition movement and the risks it brings to life as you know and enjoy it? Or should you stay put to make the status quo more human? You are a Christian. You have heard the arguments on both sides and you turn to the Bible yourself. In Ephesians you read "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ." But you can't forget the words of God to Moses in Exodus: "I have seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry because of their task masters. I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them. Say to Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'"

Or the year 1942. Europe is traumatized by war; vast numbers of people are vigorously affirming a "gospel" of racial supremacy, unbridled power and brutality. You are a German Christian, and though the official church has knuckled under to those in power, you see the situation for what it is, and those in power for what they are. There is an assassination plot brewing against Hitler. By becoming involved, you might have a hand in saving hundreds of thousands of people more years of suffering and atrocity; your involvement might also save the integrity of the Christian Faith...but murder is the means. In Judges 6 you read God's word to Gideon: "Go and use this strength of yours to free Israel from the power of the Midianites." But the words of Exodus 20 haunt you, "Thou Shalt not Kill."

It is clear that lifting a Bible verse cannot alone answer the most difficult questions required for living a Christian life. In his last words, Jesus didn't promise the answers would be simple or that following the commandments would be easy. What he did promise was that the Spirit of Truth...the living Christ, would be with us into all our futures. This living Christ demonstrated the way of love and left this command as the final word: "Love one another." Yet as we face complex situations, we ask the question of Judas in the midst of Jesus' final reminder: "Lord what is all this about? Do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

The Gospel writer has said again and again that not all see, not all hear, not all understand the message of Christ. Again and again, the disciples themselves are confused.

John's gospel reasons that all the world can't know God because men and women refuse to love Jesus Christ. We refuse to relate to God in such a way that puts our momentary needs second and puts God and neighbor first. Only through the hard work of loving do we learn to love.

In a world full of "looking out for Number 1"...a person who actually loves

neighbor, enemy, opponent, seems as unaware of the real game of life as the little leaguer picking dandelions when the hit lands in center field. To attempt to love God and neighbor seems impractical, unrealistic and downright unnecessary.

Aware of being out of the mainline thought of the day Judas wondered, "How is it that we know you --but the whole world misses the big picture?" To love Jesus and to obey his commandments in a world which does not share this vision could not be easy. Most of us want to be a part of the majority. For instance, the party should have others there that we know, the book is read because it is a best seller, the predicted winner is where we place our vote. There is safety in numbers. Who wants to be the first on the dance floor, first to wear the Santa Fe skirt, first to express an unpopular opinion, or first to suggest limiting nuclear weapons? And so we ask with Judas, "Why aren't the answers clear to all? Why don't we all know how to love? Jesus answers with what seems like a riddle. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments...I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you."

The musical "Shenandoah" depicted the torment of the Civil War. Charlie Anderson and his family lived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Charlie refused to join the Confederate cause of let his sons fight in the war. His Christian conscience led him to believe the war was not the way to settle the slavery dispute.

He was not of majority opinion...his family was persecuted for not joining the cause. As the fighting progressed, Charlie put his thoughts to song:

The dream has turned to ashes
The wheat has turned to straw
And someone asks the question
What was the dyin for?

The living can't remember
The dead no longer care
Don't tell me it's different now
I've heard it all before.

"Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, helped plan Hitler's overthrow. For resisting the fanatical Nazi movement, he was arrested, imprisoned and hanged in April 1948. During his long seige in prison, he wrote letters, poetry, theology... and left his words for future generations. In one letter he wrote, "We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many stains; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and made us cynical.

Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or clever tacticians; but plain, honest, straightforward people."

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison p17)

1982 - 49% of Americans believe if we were to become involved in a war with the Soviet Union it would become an all-out nuclear war. When both countries can demolish each other several times over, the idea of military supremacy takes on different meaning. You believe there are issues important enough to die for. Yet you wonder if the potential of nuclear destruction allows us to waste time with words of confrontation and no words of negotiation. Can our country humanely afford the proposed 240 billion dollar build-up in strategic weapons and watch the surge of destitute and homeless?

Our generation too seeks the Biblical truth. We hear in Genesis the great beginning. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

Much later we read the poetic description of the final battle and world's end in Revelation. "The great city was split into three parts and the cities of the nations fell....and every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found." (Rev.16:18-20)

The final words from such as unlikely person as Admiral Hyman Rickover....father of nuclear power...are astounding. This is the man who singlehandedly led the build-up of the American nuclear navy. To a congressional subcommittee in January 1982, the newly retired Admiral said - "What difference does it make if we have 100 or 200 submarines. We can sink everything in the ocean several times." (Citizen-Journal, March 27, 1982) He went on to say, "I'm not proud of the part I played." Closing words have a tendency to speak the truth. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

In 1982, our generation faces a most crucial question...to build more nuclear weapons or to work toward an alternative. Our generation needs to hear the struggle of Christians who seek to understand what it means to love Christ and obey his commandments in this time and place.

The answers to the question vary between citizen and citizen, Christian and Christian. Our denomination has called us to publically proclaim our opposition to the Arms Race. John - with Jesus' last words tells us the ultimate and final criteria is love - love of God, love of neighbor. When we place past and future generations next to the command to love, what is our response?

This Sunday has been proclaimed Peace Sabbath across our nation. Congregations in churches and synagogues of all fifty states are spending time this weekend to uplift the urgent need to show our love for the earth, our children, our parents, our enemy, our future. In response to our Session's recent action, I urge you to take this call to halt the arms race seriously. Study the issue: many resources are available in our church library. Discuss the complex question with others. Write the President, Senators and Representatives in Congress. For those of you who desire to endorse the call to halt the arms race, the Presbytery of Scioto Valley is sponsoring buses to the rally in New York City prior to the opening of the UN Special Session of Disarmament June 12. The time to take nuclear weapons seriously is 1982.

A popular Broadway play was written and named after two minor characters in Shakespear's play Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been spies who at the end of the play find themselves rowing across the English Channel...mistakenly thinking they are safe. They have witnessed many deaths...the King, the Queen, Hamlet and others. While their parts were small in the tragedy, they had contributed to the outcome. In the last act, Rosencrantz turns to Guildenstern and says rather pathetically, "There must have been a time somewhere near the beginning when we could have said, "No." (Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard, P. 98) We can say "No" in our generation.

We can say "Yes" to love. Saying yes to love is the most unrealistic and most realistic way to approach the continuation of life. To follow Christ is to swim against the current, to oppose powers like slavery, Hitler, nuclear disaster. Yet we are promised "I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you...Because I live you will live also." The final answer for every generation is love. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.